

Missio Inter Gentes

Towards a New Paradigm in the Mission Theology of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC)

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ABSTRACT

This essay seeks to investigate the mission theology of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) as presented in its official documents during the past three decades of its existence and evaluate its implications. In its official documents, the FABC has proceeded on the basis that the Asian milieu, with its rich diversity and plurality of religions, cultures and philosophical worldviews require a distinctively Asian approach to the proclamation of the Gospel that is sensitive to such diversity and pluralism. To this end, this essay surveys and examines the principal aspects and foundational principles of the FABC's theology of mission. It also explores the implications of the FABC's missiological approach for meeting the challenges of the task of carrying out the Christian mission in the diverse and pluralistic Asian *Sitz-im-Leben*, especially the FABC's consistent insistence that the Christian mission in Asia is best carried out through a threefold dialogue with the myriad of Asian religious traditions, Asian cultures and the teeming masses of Asian poor and marginalized. It then suggests that the FABC's missiological approach is best described as *missio inter gentes* (mission *among* the nations) rather than the traditional *missio ad gentes* (mission *to* the nations), because of how the FABC perceives the issue of religious pluralism in Asia and its preferred non-confrontational dialogical approach for dealing with it.

Romanticized by exotic legends and travellers' fables for thousands of years, Asia, the birthplace of many of the world's ancient civilizations and

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religions, is a continent blessed by vibrant communities with their colorful kaleidoscope of cultures, religions and philosophies, many of which are more ancient than Christianity. While Asia is home to some two-thirds of the world's population, it nevertheless remains the continent with the smallest Christian population – this notwithstanding almost two millennia of Christian missionary activity, beginning with the tentative steps taken by the early Assyrian Christian missionaries who ventured to India and China in the first Christian millennium. At the beginning of the third Christian millennium, Christians account for only approximately four per cent of the total population of Asia, and the only Asian countries with a significant Christian population are the Philippines, South Korea and East Timor.

This essay seeks both to investigate and evaluate the mission theology of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) as presented in its official documents during the past three decades of its existence.¹ The FABC is a transnational body which came into existence following the 1970 Asian Bishops' Meeting with Pope Paul VI in Manila. It currently comprises fourteen full member conferences: Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Laos-Cambodia, Malaysia-Singapore-Brunei, Myanmar, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand and Vietnam, as well as ten associate members: Hong Kong, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Macau, Mongolia, Nepal, Siberia, Tadjikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Looking back at the past three decades, it would certainly be an understatement to say that the FABC has made a highly significant impact on the development, orientation and growth of the spiritual and theological life of the Asian local churches. Writing in 1996, missiologist Stephen Bevans observes that “the FABC could look back on twenty-five years of activity which had yielded an impressive body of documents that are incredibly rich, amazingly visionary, and truly worth careful reading and study” (Bevans 1996: 2). This “impressive body of documents” is the

¹All of the important documents of the FABC have been collected and published in a convenient three-volume collection: Rosales 1992, Eilers 1997 and Eilers 2002. Unless otherwise indicated, all references to the documents of the FABC are taken from this three-volume collection. For excellent overviews of the FABC, its history and theological perspectives, see Chia 2003 and Fox 2002.

result of its Plenary Assemblies,² Bishops' Institutes,³ consultations, congresses, colloquia, and important position papers from the FABC Office of Theological Concerns (formerly known as the FABC Theological Advisory Commission).

In its official documents, the FABC has proceeded on the basis that the Asian milieu, with its rich diversity and plurality of religions, cultures and philosophical worldviews require a distinctively Asian approach to the proclamation of the gospel that is sensitive to such diversity and pluralism. To this end, this essay will survey and examine critically the principal aspects and foundational principles of the FABC's theology of mission. It will also explore the implications of the FABC's missiological approach for meeting the challenges of the task of carrying out the Christian mission in the diverse and pluralistic Asian *Sitz im Leben*, especially the FABC's consistent insistence that the Christian mission in Asia is best carried out through a threefold dialogue with the myriad of Asian religious traditions, Asian cultures and the teeming masses of Asian poor and marginalized. It will then go on further to suggest that the FABC's missiological approach is best described as *missio inter gentes* (mission *among* the nations) rather than the traditional *missio ad gentes* (mission *to* the nations), because of how the FABC perceives the issue of religious pluralism in Asia and its preferred non-confrontational dialogical approach for dealing with it.

For the purposes of this essay, the Final Statements of all seven FABC Plenary Assemblies from 1974 to 2000, the statements of the various Bishops' Institutes and the FABC Office of Theological Concerns, as well as consultations, colloquia, conferences and symposia organized under the

²The FABC convenes in Plenary Assembly, its highest body, with the participation of all presidents and delegates of member episcopal conferences once in every four years. To-date seven plenary assemblies have been held: FABC I: Evangelization in Modern Day Asia (Taipei, Taiwan, 1974), FABC II: Prayer – Life of the Church in Asia (Calcutta, India, 1978), FABC III: The Church – A Community of Faith in Asia (Bangkok, Thailand, 1982), FABC IV: The Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Church and in the World of Asia (Tokyo, Japan, 1986), FABC V: Journeying Together Toward The Third Millennium (Bandung, Indonesia, 1990), FABC VI: Christian Discipleship in Asia Today: Service to Life (Manila, Philippines, 1995), and FABC VII: A Renewed Church in Asia on a Mission of Love and Service (Sampran, Thailand, 2000).

³This includes the Bishops' Institutes for Lay Apostolate (BILA), Missionary Apostolate (BIMA), Interreligious Affairs (BIRA), Social Action (BISA) and Social Communication (BISCOM).

aegis of the FABC will be studied and analyzed. As D. Colombo explains, while it is true that the statements of the various FABC Bishops' Institutes do not share "the same authority of the Assemblies and are an indirect expression of the FABC," nonetheless they "constitute the mechanism by which the lines of reflection and action offered to the Federation and the Assemblies are in fact drawn up and tried" (Colombo 1997: 14, cited in Quatra 2000: 24). Similarly, Miguel Marcelo Quatra points out that the documents of the various FABC Offices, e.g., the Office of Theological Concerns, "enjoy an authority that might be called reflected, from the fact that it is an accredited instance of the Federation and of the Bishops' Conferences that chose its members" (Quatra 2000: 23-24).⁴ Hence, while all of these documents have different levels of theological authority (the most authoritative of which would be the Final Statements of the FABC Plenary Assemblies, followed by the documents of the Bishops' Institutes, and other regional or national meetings), taken together as an organic whole and examined synchronically, they could give a clearer view of the FABC's theology of mission.⁵

Rooting the Christian Gospel in the Religious Diversity and Plurality of Asia

Perhaps the greatest challenge that the FABC bishops face with respect to the task of doing Christian mission is the question of the diversity and plurality of the Asian milieu, with its myriad religions, cultures and peoples. In the course of its two thousand year history, the church has encountered a diversity of peoples, cultures and religions, beginning with the Jewish and Greco-Roman cultures, before moving into Roman, Germanic, Celtic, Gallic and other European cultures from the fourth century onwards. In Europe and the Americas, the quandary was resolved by Christianity becoming the dominant religion and culture. Backed by the full might of the imperial power within a church-state alliance, the church in Europe overcame pagan religions and institutions to Christianize the Europe of late

⁴E.g., the FABC Office of Theological Concerns comprises bishop theologians who hold leadership positions, and lay theologians specifically appointed by bishops' conferences to collaborate with the bishop theologians to produce important studies, position statements, etc., for use by the wider FABC constituencies.

⁵For further discussion, see also Quatra 2000: 22-25 and Chia 2003: 13-17.

antiquity, and this led to the emergence of Christendom in Europe. David Bosch described this development and its implications for the Church's missionary outreach succinctly as follows:

Emperor Theodosius' decrees of 380 (which demanded that all citizens of the Roman Empire be Christians) and 391 (which proscribed all non-Christian cults), inexorably paved the way for Pope Boniface's bull, *Unam Sanctam* (1302), which proclaimed that the Catholic Church was the only institution guaranteeing salvation; for the Council of Florence (1442), which assigned to the everlasting fire of hell everyone not attached to the Catholic Church. . . . (Bosch 1991: 474)

Bosch further contended that the "unshaken, massive, and collective certitude of the Middle Ages, which existed until the eighteenth century," perceived the task of Christian mission as that of "conquest and displacement," viz., "Christianity was understood to be unique, exclusive, superior, definitive, normative and absolute, the only religion which had the divine right to exist and extend itself" (Ibid.: 475). For him, with the collapse of western colonialism, Christianity "lost its hegemony" everywhere and "today has to compete for allegiance on the open market of religions and ideologies," such that "there are no longer oceans separating Christians from other religionists" (Ibid.). On this basis, he concluded that "we have reached the point where there can be little doubt that the two largest unsolved problems for the Christian church are its relationship (1) to *world views which offer this-worldly salvation*, and (2) to *other faiths*" (Ibid.: 476-477).

Clearly, Bosch's careful observations and comments are especially relevant to the difficult task of doing Christian mission in the diverse and pluralistic Asian world. The Vietnamese-American theologian Peter C. Phan hits the nail squarely on its head when he states that "it is in Asia that the question of religious pluralism is literally a matter of life and death," and more importantly, "the future of Asian Christianity hangs in balance depending on how religious pluralism is understood and lived out" (Phan 2003: 117). The issue is deceptively simple but a solution is exceedingly elusive: how should the church in general, and missionaries in particular, react to the diversity and plurality of religions and cultures in Asia?

To any casual outside observer, the FABC is very much at home with the diversity and plurality of the Asian *Sitz im Leben*. From the very

beginning, the FABC has eschewed all forms of religious exclusivism, perceiving religious pluralism as an innate and unique aspect of the Asian socio-religious landscape (see Fernando 2000: 864-869), and seeking consistently to work within the diverse pluralism of the Asian milieu with its manifold peoples, cultures and religions. While others may consider the diversity and plurality of postmodern Europe and North America as challenges that the church has to confront and overcome, for the Asian bishops, the question is rather how the Asian local churches could find themselves at home with such diversity and plurality.

Thus, at its founding at the Asian Bishops' Meeting with Pope Paul VI in Manila (1970), the Asian bishops acknowledged that Asia is "a continent of ancient and diverse cultures, religions, histories and traditions, a region like Joseph's coat of many colors" (*ABM*, art. 7, in Rosales 1992: 4, cf. *FABC II*, art. 7, in *Ibid.*: 30). The First FABC Plenary Assembly recognized that the great religious traditions of Asia are:

significant and positive elements in the economy of God's design and salvation. In them we recognize and respect profound spiritual and ethical meanings and values. Over many centuries they have been the treasury of the religious experience of our ancestors, from which our contemporaries do not cease to draw light and strength. They have been (and continue to be) the authentic expression of the noblest longings of their hearts, and the home of their contemplation and prayer. They have helped to give shape to the histories and cultures of our nations. (*FABC I*, art. 14, in *Ibid.*: 14)

One year after the conclusion of FABC I, BISA II came out, among other things, with the following statement on pluralism which would undergird all subsequent discussions on pluralism in the various FABC Plenary Assemblies and Bishops' Institutes:

.. pluralism is a necessity once we work through the mediation of secular analysis and worldviews. This pluralism should not be a threat to our Christian unity, but on the contrary, a positive and creative sign that our unity is deeper than whatever the concrete technical analysis or viewpoints might show: a genuine value that emphasizes unity in diversity. (*BISA II*, art. 10, in *Ibid.*: 204)

For the FABC, pluralism is not as something negative, but a source of richness and strength:

...peace and harmony in Asian societies, composed as they are of many cultural, ethnic and linguistic groups, would require recognition of legitimate pluralism and respect for all the groups. Unity, peace and harmony are to be realized in diversity. Diversity is not something to be regretted and abolished, but to be rejoiced over and promoted, since it represents richness and strength. Harmony is not simply the absence of strife, described as “live and let live.” The test of true harmony lies in the acceptance of diversity as richness. (*BIRA IV/11*, art. 15, in *Ibid.*: 321)

Elsewhere, the FABC has affirmed that “it is an inescapable truth that God’s Spirit is at work in all religious traditions” (*BIRA IV/12*, art. 7, in *Ibid.*: 326) because:

it has been recognized since the time of the apostolic Church, and stated clearly again by the Second Vatican Council, that the Spirit of Christ is active outside the bounds of the visible Church. God’s saving grace is not limited to members of the Church, but is offered to every person. His grace may lead some to accept baptism and enter the Church, but it cannot be presumed that this must always be the case. His ways are mysterious and unfathomable, and no one can dictate the direction of His grace. (*BIRA II*, art. 12, in *Ibid.* 115, cf. *BIRA IV/1*, art. 10, in *Ibid.*: 249)

In other words, the FABC perceives the religious traditions of Asia as “expressions of the presence of God’s Word and of the universal action of his Spirit in them” (*Theological Consultation*, art. 43, in *Ibid.*: 344). In particular, the “great religions of Asia with their respective creeds, cults and codes reveal to us diverse ways of responding to God whose Spirit is active in all peoples and cultures” (*BIRA IV/7*, art. 12, in *Ibid.*: 310). For the FABC, it is “the same spirit, who has been active in the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus and in the Church, who was active among all peoples before the Incarnation and is active among the nations, religions and peoples of Asia today” (*BIRA IV/3*, art. 6, in *Ibid.*: 259).

More significantly, the Final Statement of the 1995 FABC Hindu-Christian Dialogue made it clear that the FABC viewed religious pluralism as constitutive of the Asian reality:

Beyond the extremes of inclusivism and exclusivism, pluralism is accepted in resonance with the constitutive plurality of reality. Religions, as they are manifested in history, are complementary perceptions of the ineffable divine

mystery, the God-beyond-God. All religions are visions of the divine mystery. No particular religion can raise the claim of being the norm for all others. We religious believers are co-pilgrims, who share intimate spiritual experiences and reflections with one another with concern and compassion, with genuine openness to truth and the freedom of spiritual seekers (*sadhakas*). In this process we become increasingly sensitive to human suffering and collaborate in promoting justice, peace and ecological wholeness. (*BIRA V/3*, art. 6, in Eilers 1997: 157-158)

This rejection of any religious exclusivism echoes an earlier statement: “When various religious groups lay absolute claim to truth, aggressive militancy and divisive proselytism follow and, in their wake, bitter religious divisions” (*BIRA IV/4*, art. 4, in Rosales 1992: 300). As a result, an Indian commentator is able to conclude that the Asian Bishops “consider religious pluralism as a grace and as a God-given call to be co-pilgrims along with the believers of other religions in search of Truth in love” (Fernando 2000: 865).

At the same time, the FABC has acknowledged that critics of religious pluralism often raise the specter of unbridled relativism or subjectivism. In response to these critics, the FABC Office of Theological Concerns explains in a recent document entitled *Methodology: Asian Christian Theology, Doing Theology in Asia Today* that, among other things, recognition of the religious pluralism does not necessarily lead to an acceptance of subjectivism or relativism:

Pluralism need not always entail a radical subjectivism or relativism, in the sense of claiming that all points of view are equally valid. However, it is also true that the dawn of pluralistic, democratic, modern societies has paved the way to excessive individualism and subjectivism, and a consequent relativizing of all reality. Thus, today there are persons and groups who hold all reality to be relative. For such persons or groups, pluralism means relativism, in the sense that they claim all points of view are equally valid. *Such philosophical or theological positions are to be rejected; and, in fact, all the major Asian religions condemn such relativizing of reality, especially the relativizing of basic human values.* However, just because certain persons and groups are misled in their search for truth, and just because they tend to perceive pluralism as relativism, or just because they tend to relativize all reality, we cannot conclude that all pluralism leads to relativism. (Eilers 2002: 334)

Mission as Dialogue with the Threefold Reality of Asian Religions, Cultures and Poverty

From the very beginning, the FABC has always maintained that at the heart of the task of mission of the Asian local churches lies the dialogical encounter between the local churches and the Asian milieu with its triple reality of Asian religions, culture and poverty:

[A] church in continuous, humble and loving dialogue with the living traditions, the cultures, the great religions – in brief, with all the life-realities of the people in whose midst it has sunk its roots deeply and whose history and life it gladly makes its own seeks to share in whatever truly belongs to that people: its meanings and its values, its aspirations, its thoughts and its language, its songs and its artistry. – Even its frailties and failings it assumes, so that they too may be healed. For so did God’s Son assume the totality of our fallen human condition (save only for sin) so that He might make it truly His own, and redeem it in His paschal mystery. (*FABC I*, 12, in Rosales 1992: 14)

Looking back at the First FABC Plenary Assembly, Michael Amaladoss comments that the Asian Bishops saw mission as a dialogue with “the threefold realities of Asia,” viz., “its rich cultures, its ancient and great religions, and the poor” and accepted Asian religions as “significant and positive elements in the economy of God’s design of salvation” because they have “*a living experience of other religions*” (Amaladoss 1991: 362, emphasis added).

For the FABC, dialogue is “an integral part of evangelization” (*BIMA II*, art. 14, in Rosales 1992: 100), “intrinsic to the very life of the Church” (*BIRA I*, art. 9, in Ibid. 111), an “essential mode of all evangelization” (*Message of the 1979 International Congress on Mission*, art. 19, in Ibid.: 131), and “a true expression of the Church’s evangelizing action” (*BIMA II*, art. 14, in Ibid.: 101). At the same time, the FABC has also explained that dialogue *does not preclude* the need for the proclamation of the Christian gospel: in fact there could be a moment when “we shall not be timid when God opens the door for us to *proclaim* explicitly the Lord Jesus Christ as the Savior and the answer to the fundamental questions of human existence” (*FABC V*, art. 4.3, in Ibid.: 282, italics in the original). However, a distinctively Asian approach of proclamation which is sensitive to the Asian *Sitz im Leben* is needed:

Mission may find its greatest urgency in Asia; it also finds in our continent a distinctive mode. We affirm, together with others, that “the proclamation of Jesus Christ is the center and primary element of evangelization” (*Statement of the FABC All-Asia Conference on Evangelization*, Suwon, South Korea, August 24-31, 1988). But the proclamation of Jesus Christ in Asia means, first of all, the witness of Christians and of Christian communities to the values of the Kingdom of God, *a proclamation through Christlike deeds*. For Christians in Asia, to proclaim Christ means above all to live like him, in the midst of our neighbors of other faiths and persuasions, and to do his deeds by the power of his grace. Proclamation through dialogue and deeds – this is the first call to the Churches in Asia. (*FABC V*, art. 4.1, in *Ibid.*: 281-282, italics in the original)

On the basis of the foregoing, the Fifth FABC Plenary Assembly has equated the triple dialogue with the Christian mission imperative and concludes thus:

Mission includes: being with the people, responding to their needs, with sensitiveness to the presence of God in cultures and other religious traditions, and witnessing to the values of God’s Kingdom through presence, solidarity, sharing and word. *Mission will mean a dialogue with Asian’s poor, with its local cultures, and with other religious traditions*. (*FABC V*, art. 3.1.2, in *Ibid.*: 280, emphasis added)

This identification of proclamation with the “witness of life” builds upon the earlier statement made by the Third Bishops’ Institute for Missionary Apostolate meeting in Changhua in 1982:

It is true that in many places [in Asia] Christ cannot yet be proclaimed openly by words. But He can, and should be, proclaimed through other ways, namely: through the witness of life of the Christian community and family, and their striving to know and live more fully the faith they possess; through their desire to live in peace and harmony with those who do not share our faith; through the appreciation by Christians of the human and religious values possessed by their non-Christian neighbors, and through these same Christians’ willingness to collaborate in those activities which promote the human community. (*BIMA III*, art. 10, in *Ibid.*: 105)

Interestingly, the Seventh Plenary Assembly (Samphan 2000), with the benefit of two months’ reflection on John Paul II’s apostolic exhortation

Ecclesia in Asia, chose to reassert their preference for the “witness of life” as the Asian way of proclaiming the Christian Gospel in Asia:

The most effective means of evangelization and service in the name of Christ has always been and continues to be the *witness of life*. The embodiment of our faith in sharing and compassion (sacrament) supports the credibility of our obedience to the Word (proclamation). This witnessing has to become the way of the Gospel for persons, institutions and the whole Church community. *Asian people will recognize the Gospel that we announce when they see in our life the transparency of the message of Jesus and the inspiring and healing figure of men and women immersed in God.* (FABC VII, in Eilers 2002: 12-13, emphasis added)

Proclamation through Dialogue

The starting point for understanding how the FABC identifies proclamation with dialogue is the 1987 document *Theses on Interreligious Dialogue* of the FABC Theological Advisory Commission (now known as the FABC Office of Theological Concerns). Of the seven theses enunciated in the document, thesis 6 asserts that proclamation is dialogical:

Dialogue and proclamation are integral but dialectical and complementary dimensions of the Church’s mission of evangelization. Authentic dialogue includes a witness to one’s total Christian faith, which is open to a similar witness of the other religious believers. Proclamation is a call to Christian discipleship and mission. As a service to the mystery of the Spirit who freely calls to conversion, and of the person who freely responds to the call, proclamation is dialogical. (*Theses on Interreligious Dialogue*, thesis 6)

As it unpacks this statement, it warns against any facile reduction of one to the other:

The relation between dialogue and proclamation is a complex one. In making an effort to understand this relationship, we must avoid from the beginning any attempt to reduce one to the other. Some would tend to say that dialogue itself is the only authentic form of proclamation since the Church is only one among the many ways to salvation; others would tend to say that dialogue is only a step, though with an identity of its own, in the total process that culminates in proclamation. While the former approach robs proclamation of any specific meaning, the latter instrumentalizes dialogue. (*Theses on Interreligious Dialogue*, art. 6.2)

The document then stresses that proclamation should not be understood in the abstract, but within the context of, and integrated into the threefold dialogue:

The Asian bishops have understood evangelization as the building up of the local church through a threefold dialogue with the cultures, the religions and the poor of Asia. Inculturation, interreligious dialogue and liberation are the three dimensions of evangelization. Proclamation is not a fourth dimension added to these three, but is the aspect of witness that is an integral element of all the three dimensions of evangelization. (*Theses on Interreligious Dialogue*, art. 6.4)

Elsewhere, the FABC has reiterated that “dialogue aimed at ‘converting’ the other to one’s own religious faith and tradition is dishonest and unethical; it is not the way of harmony” (*BIRA V/3*, art. 7, in Eilers 1997: 158). As for the relationship between dialogue, proclamation and conversion, the FABC has pointed out, rightfully, that “dialogue and proclamation are complementary. Sincere and authentic dialogue does not have for its objective the conversion of the other. For conversion depends solely on God’s internal call and the person’s free decision” (*BIRA III*, art. 4, in Rosales 1992: 120).

On the one hand, the FABC does not exclude the explicit verbal proclamation of the Christian gospel as mission, but it recognizes that context plays a very important role in determining which is the best approach to mission. Perhaps, one of the inherent dangers of proclamation is that it may result in a condescending, triumphalistic and disrespectful unidirectional *monologue* which tramples on the sensitivities of the non-Christians. In addition, proclamation comes across as being overly discursive, i.e., there is an abundance of words in preaching and proclamation which aims to prove or emphasize particular truth claims. It has been pointed out that in the Asian mindset, “truth does not impose itself, but rather *attracts* everyone and everything to itself by its beauty, splendour and fascination” (Wilfred 1988: 427) – which is what dialogue is all about. In short, proclamation without dialogue runs the risk of aggressive proselytism with its highly negative connotations. On this basis, Michael Amaladoss is able to say that evangelization in Asia as a threefold dialogue with the realities of Asia “means that we do not import readymade structures of ‘salvation’ from

somewhere, but we let the people of Asia dialogue with the Good News in a creative and relevant way” (Amaladoss 2000: 340).

On the other hand, through dialogue, not only the Asian socio-religious realities may be enriched by Christianity, in turn Christianity too may be enriched by the Asian socio-religious realities. Otherwise, a one-way monologue opens Christianity to the charge of instrumentalization, i.e., appropriating the soteriological elements in Asian socio-religious realities for Christian use without respecting their integrity within their Asian socio-religious matrix. Corollary to this view is the observation of the Indian theologian, Felix Wilfred:

Any work of mission which does not recognize what God has been doing with a people, with a country and continent and with their history, is simply and purely arrogance vis-à-vis God’s own bounteous gifts. . . . Triumphalism and exclusivism of any kind are diametrically opposed to spirituality. They fail to recognize and appreciate the thousand flowers God has let grow, flourish and blossom in the garden of the world; they fail to acknowledge in practice the presence and working of the Spirit in the life and history of peoples. (Wilfred 1990: 590)

More importantly, implicit in such a missiology is the acknowledgment and acceptance of a fundamental ontological, soteriological and existential relationship between the Christian gospel and the Asian peoples with their rich religious and cultural traditions, as well as their daily socio-economic challenges. Such a deep and profound missiology enables the local church to move away from the *plantatio ecclesiae* mentality, i.e., away from “an institution planted in Asia” towards “an evangelizing community of Asia” (*Theological Consultation*, art. 15, in Rosales 1992: 338). Clearly, the FABC has great hopes that the local church is able to be deeply inculturated in the Asian soil to the extent that it becomes not simply a church in Asia, but truly an Asian church (*BIRA IV/12*, art. 50, in *Ibid.*: 333).

Principal Goal of Mission: Building up the Kingdom of God

The FABC has taken a positive approach to such diversity and pluralism in a manner which attempts to avoid a reductionistic exclusivism, because the grace and presence of God permeate all of creation in a mysterious manner. For example, it has given a place of reverence and honor to the

diverse Asian religious traditions and acknowledged that God has drawn the Asian peoples to Godself through these religious traditions (*FABC I*, art. 15, in *Ibid.*: 14), a position that has been reiterated in *BIRA III*, art. 2 (in *Ibid.*: 119). The FABC also pointed out that:

Christians believe that God's saving will is at work, in many different ways, in all religions. It has been recognized since the time of the apostolic Church, and stated clearly again by the Second Vatican Council, that *the Spirit of Christ is active outside the bounds of the visible Church. God's saving grace is not limited to members of the Church, but is offered to every person.* His grace may lead some to accept baptism and enter the Church, but it cannot be presumed that this must always be the case. His ways are mysterious and unfathomable, and no one can dictate the direction of His grace. (*BIRA II*, art. 12, in *Ibid.*: 115, emphasis added)

Such an understanding and appreciation of diversity and plurality is also "rooted in the conviction of faith that God's plan of salvation for humanity is one and reaches out to all peoples: it is the Kingdom of God through which he seeks to reconcile all things with himself in Jesus Christ" (*Theses on Interreligious Dialogue*, art. 2.3). The document *Theses on Interreligious Dialogue* further explains that:

The focus of the Church's mission of evangelization is building up the Kingdom of God and building up the Church to be at the service of the Kingdom. The Kingdom of God is therefore wider than the Church. The Church is the sacrament of the Kingdom, visibilizing it, ordained to it, promoting it, but not equating itself with it. (*Theses on Interreligious Dialogue*, art. 6.3)

This point was subsequently affirmed at the 1988 FABC All-Asia Conference on Evangelization, which explained that the "ultimate goal of all evangelization is the ushering in and establishment of God's Kingdom, namely God's rule in the hearts and minds of our people" (*BIMA IV*, art. 5, in *Ibid.*: 292). At the same time, "the core of Christ's proclamation is the Kingdom of God" (*BIRA IV/10*, art. 6, in *Ibid.*: 314) and the local church "is an instrument for the actualization of the Kingdom" (*BIRA IV/2*, art. 8.2, in *Ibid.*: 252). The FABC has explained the relationship between the Church and the Kingdom of God as follows:

[T]he Reign of God is the very reason for the being of the Church. The Church exists in and for the Kingdom. The Kingdom, God's gift and initiative, is already begun and is continually being realized, and made present through the Spirit. Where God is accepted, when the Gospel values are lived, where man is respected . . . there is the Kingdom. *It is far wider than the Church's boundaries.* This already present reality is oriented towards the final manifestation and full perfection of the Reign of God. (*BIRA IV/2*, art. 8.1, in *Ibid.*: 252, emphasis added)

Similarly, art. 30 of the *1991 Theological Consultation* insists:

[T]he Reign of God is a universal reality, extending far beyond the boundaries of the Church. It is the reality of salvation in Jesus Christ, in which Christians and others share together. It is the fundamental "mystery of unity" which unites us more deeply than differences in religious allegiance are able to keep us apart. Seen in this manner, a "regnocentric" approach to mission theology does not in any way threaten the Christo-centric perspective of our faith. On the contrary, "regno-centrism" calls for "christo-centrism," and vice-versa, for it is in Jesus Christ and through the Christ-event that God has established his Kingdom upon the earth and in human history. (*Ibid.*: 342)

The local church is perceived as "constantly [moving] forward in mission, as it accompanies all humankind in its pilgrimage to the Kingdom of the Father" (*FABC III*, art. 15, in *Ibid.*: 60). In this respect, the FABC also pointed out that:

Christian communities in Asia must listen to the Spirit at work in the many communities of believers who live and experience their own faith, who share and celebrate it in their own social, cultural and religious history, and that they (as communities of the Gospel) must accompany these others "in a common pilgrimage toward the ultimate goal, in relentless quest for the Absolute," and that thus they are to be "sensitively attuned to the work of the Spirit in the resounding symphony of Asian communion." (*FABC III*, art. 8.2, in *Ibid.*: 57)

In addition, the 1991 FABC Theological Consultation concluded that "if the Church is the sacrament of the Kingdom, the reason is that she is the sacrament of Jesus Christ himself who is the mystery of salvation, to

whom she is called to bear witness and whom she is called to announce. To be at the service of the Kingdom means for the Church to announce Jesus Christ" (*Theological Consultation*, art. 33, in *Ibid.*: 342).

In arriving at the foregoing conclusion, the FABC is convinced that there is one divine plan of salvation which is wider than the Church, and more significantly, the Church does not have a monopoly on salvation. As the *Theses on Interreligious Dialogue* makes it clear:

The one divine plan of salvation for all peoples embraces the whole universe. The mission of the Church has to be understood within the context of this plan. *The Church does not monopolize God's action in the universe.* While it is aware of a special mission from God in the world, it *has to be attentive to God's action in the world*, as manifested also in the other religions. This twofold awareness constitutes the two poles of the Church's evangelizing action in relation to other religions. While proclamation is the expression of its awareness of being in mission, *dialogue is the expression of its awareness of God's presence and action outside its boundaries.* . . . Proclamation is the affirmation of and witness to God's action in oneself. Dialogue is the openness and attention to the mystery of God's action in the other believer. *It is a perspective of faith that we cannot speak of the one without the other.* (*Theses on Interreligious Dialogue*, art. 6.5, emphasis added)

The basis for this position is that the call to conversion and discipleship points primarily towards God, and only secondarily towards the Church:

The pilgrim Church witnesses not to itself but to the mystery; and calls to conversion and discipleship refer primarily to the relationship between God who calls and the person who responds. Only secondarily do they refer to the Church-community. The identity of the Church does not lie in being the exclusive "ark of salvation" but in being in mission to transform the world from within as leaven, without being fully aware of the forms that such transformation may lead to. (*Theses on Interreligious Dialogue*, art. 6.12)

Moreover, far from being an excuse for putting aside the task of evangelization, the paradigm of the Kingdom of God in Asia challenges the local churches of Asia to work "with the Christians of other Churches, together with our sisters and brothers of other faiths and with all people of goodwill, to make the Kingdom of God more visibly present in Asia" (*FABC V*, art. 2.3.9, in *Ibid.*: 279). Elsewhere in the same document,

the FABC pointed out that the ultimate goal of mission in Asia is “to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom of God: to promote the values of the Kingdom such as justice, peace, love, compassion, equality and brotherhood in these Asian realities. In short, it is to make the Kingdom of God a reality” (*FABC V*, art. 1.7, in *Ibid.*: 275). The inclusivity of the Kingdom of God holds great appeal to the FABC, which “acknowledge[s] the Kingdom at work in socio-political situations and in cultural and religious traditions of Asia” (*Theological Consultation*, art. 39, in *Ibid.* 344). For the Asian Catholic Bishops, the inclusive nature of the Kingdom of God is able to encompass those people who are followers of Jesus Christ, his life and his teachings and those who continue to remain Hindus, Buddhists, Taoists or Muslims, and who are otherwise excluded from the dialectical set-up of present ecclesial structures (Wilfred 1988: 429).⁶

Towards an “Active Integral Evangelization”

The relationship between interreligious harmony, mission and dialogue was elaborated by the Fifth FABC Plenary Assembly: “Mission in Asia will also seek through *dialogue* to serve the cause of unity of the peoples of Asia marked by such a diversity of beliefs, cultures and socio-political structures. In an Asia marked by diversity and torn by conflicts, the Church must in a special way be a sacrament – a visible sign and instrument of unity and harmony” (*FABC V*, art. 4.2, in Rosales 1992: 282, italics in the original). This call is especially prophetic and poignant today, in view of the occurrence of religious strife in many parts of Asia, e.g., the Hindu-Christian conflict in India and the Muslim-Christian conflict in Indonesia. The Fifth FABC Plenary Assembly also held the local churches have “to discern, in dialogue with Asian peoples and Asian realities, what deeds the Lord wills to be done so that all humankind may be gathered together in harmony as his family” (*FABC V*, art. 6.3, in *Ibid.*: 283). This is because it is “the local churches and communities which can discern and work (in dialogue with each other and with other persons of goodwill) the way the Gospel is best proclaimed, the Church set up, the values of God’s

⁶See also the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India’s Response to the *Lineamenta* for the 1998 Synod for Asia: in union with the Father and the Spirit, Christ is indeed the source and cause of salvation for all peoples, but this fact does not exclude the possibility of God mysteriously employing other cooperating channels (art. 5.1, in CBCI 1998: 121).

Kingdom realized in their own place and time. In fact, it is by responding to and serving the needs of the peoples of Asia that the different Christian communities become truly local Churches” (*FABC V*, art. 3.3.1, in *Ibid.*: 281).

Referring to the foregoing points, the Seventh Plenary Assembly of the FABC coined a new term – “active integral evangelization” (Eilers 2002: 3) to describe an approach to mission which integrates commitment and service to life, life witness, dialogue, and building up the Kingdom of God. The Statement explains the rationale for this term as follows:

For thirty years, as we have tried to reformulate our Christian identity in Asia, we have addressed different issues, one after another: evangelization, inculturation, dialogue, the Asian-ness of the Church, justice, the option for the poor, etc. Today, after three decades, we no longer speak of such distinct issues. We are addressing present needs that are massive and increasingly complex. *These issues are not separate topics to be discussed, but aspects of an integrated approach to our Mission of Love and Service. We need to feel and act “integrally.” As we face the needs of the 21st century, we do so with Asian hearts, in solidarity with the poor and the marginalized, in union with all our Christian brothers and sisters, and by joining hands with all men and women of Asia of many different faiths. Inculturation, dialogue, justice and the option for the poor are aspects of whatever we do.* (*Ibid.*: 8, emphasis added)

Missio Inter Gentes: A New Paradigm in the FABC’s Mission Theology

From its inception, the FABC has consistently sought to make the Christian Gospel and local churches be truly part of the Asian *Sitz im Leben*. The FABC Bishops are very much at home in the pluralistic Asian milieu, having been born into, and lived amidst such rich diversity and plurality. They recognize that many Christians (laity, clergy and even bishops) come from a “mixed” religious background. They have non-Christian relatives, non-Christian friends, and non-Christian neighbors. Growing up immersed and steeped in such diversity and plurality, they also have firsthand experiences of communalists, nationalists, fanatics and fundamentalists who not only reject pluralism and diversity, but also seek to eradicate pluralism and impose their vision as normative through coercion and violence. The forced conversions of Christians in many parts of Asia,

the simmering Christian-Muslim conflicts in many parts of Indonesia, and heavy restrictions placed on Christians and their freedom of association are imprinted in the consciousness of these Asian bishops. Ironically, without pluralism and diversity, there is no room for the Christian Gospel in Asia, a continent dominated by the world's principal religions. At the same time, the FABC Bishops recognize cultural diversity and religious pluralism lie at the heart of what it means to be Asian. To be truly Asian and at home in the Asian milieu, the Asian local churches are called to embrace this cultural diversity and religious pluralism. Indeed, as far as the FABC is concerned, diversity and plurality is not to be gotten rid of, but "rejoiced over and promoted" (*BIRA IV/11*, art. 15, in Rosales 1992: 321).

This being the case, if Asian Christians want to "take their Asianness seriously as the context of their being Christian" (Phan 2000: 218), they have to see such diversity and pluralism not as a dilemma to be eradicated. Clearly, Asian Christians live and work with believers of other religions who are their families, neighbors, friends and colleagues, sharing with them the joys and sufferings, blessings and misfortunes of daily living. While John Paul II speaks highly of the achievements of interfaith prayer and dialogue at Assisi, Asian Christians live in a permanent Assisi-type situation. While the pope may invite representatives of other religions to Assisi for prayer and dialogue, Asian Christians live in the midst of the faithful of other religions, engaging in a permanent Assisi-style dialogue of life with these fellow Asian neighbors.

Perhaps the neologism "*missio inter gentes*" is an apt term to describe the missiological strategy of the FABC, as it attempts to break free from past discredited missiological approaches. The term "*missio inter gentes*" was first proposed by William R. Burrows in his response (Burrows 2001) to Michael Amaladoss' presentation entitled "Pluralism of Religions and the Proclamation of Jesus Christ in the Context of Asia" (Amaladoss 2001) which he delivered at the 56th Annual Convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America. One could say that the FABC's preferred missiology is one of a "mission among the nations" (*missio inter gentes*), with an emphasis on solidarity and harmony with the Asian peoples within their diverse and pluralistic *Sitz im Leben*. The traditional image of mission as "sending out" may no longer be useful, not only because, in the words of

Donal Dorr, it is “so closely linked to a purely institutional and hierarchical model of church,” but also that “it suggests that mission is a one-way activity, taking little or no account of the prior presence and activity of God in the world – in the great world religions, in the primal religions, and in the secular world” (Dorr 2000: 189). The FABC has recognized this quandary from the very beginning when it opted for, and consistently emphasized a threefold dialogue with Asian cultures, religions and the poor as the preferred approach to mission.

While the FABC has not used the phrase “*missio inter gentes*” to describe its mission strategy, it is submitted that “*missio inter gentes*” best exemplifies what the FABC hopes to achieve in Asia. Indeed, a survey of their documents reveals that the FABC has consistently sought to carry out a *missio inter gentes*, even though it has not use that term. Realizing that, (i) they would never dominate Asia in the manner Christendom dominated medieval Europe, and (ii) for their survival they have to become truly rooted in the Asian milieu, then a *missio inter gentes* approach would be perfectly at home within the diverse and pluralistic *Sitz-im-Leben* of Asian cultures and religions. Rather than proclaiming “to” (*ad*) the nations in the hopes of getting them to abandon their religions in favor of the Christian gospel, the FABC Bishops have chosen a mission paradigm that seeks to “immerse” the local churches in the diverse and pluralistic Asian *Sitz-im-Leben*, sharing life in solidarity with the Asian peoples and serving life, as Jesus had done. As the Sixth FABC Plenary Assembly explains:

Like Jesus, we “have to pitch our tents” in the midst of all humanity building a better world, but especially among the suffering and the poor, the marginalized and the downtrodden of Asia. In profound “solidarity with suffering humanity” and led by the Spirit of life, we need to immerse ourselves in Asia’s cultures of poverty and deprivation, from whose depths the aspirations for love and life are most poignant and compelling. Serving life demands communion with every woman and man seeking and struggling for life, in the way of Jesus’ solidarity with humanity. (*FABC VI*, art. 14.2, in Eilers 1997: 8)

The consistent emphasis of the FABC on solidarity, companionship and partnership with the Asian peoples is truly a *missio inter gentes* in every aspect of the term. A survey of some of the key pronouncements in its many Plenary Statements reveals this aspect of *missio inter gentes* so clearly and

succinctly.⁷ At its first Plenary Assembly in 1974, the Asian bishops spoke of the local church as one incarnate in a people. Concretely, they said, such an incarnation would place a local church “in continuous, humble and loving dialogue with the living traditions, the cultures, the great religions” of a particular area (*FABC I*, art. 12, in Rosales 1992: 14). Speaking of the “dialogue of life,” the Asian bishops insisted that it is not just a matter of working for people, but being with them, and learning from them “their real needs and aspirations . . . and to strive for their fulfillment” (*FABC I*, art. 20, in *Ibid.*: 15).

Hence, from the very beginning the Asian bishops have been interested, not just in a presence over and against the Asian peoples, but a presence that is relational and dialogical. Moreover, the FABC points out that Christian communities in Asia must not only “listen to the Spirit at work in the many communities of believers who live and experience their own faith, who share and celebrate it in their own social, cultural and religious history,” but also “they (as communities of the Gospel) must accompany these others on a common pilgrimage toward the ultimate goal, in relentless quest for the Absolute.” In doing so, they must become “sensitively attuned to the work of the Spirit in the resounding symphony of Asian communion” (*FABC III*, art. 8.2, in *Ibid.*: 57). Clearly, the FABC call to Asian local churches to walk in common pilgrimage with, as well as discern the Spirit at work in Asian peoples with their ancient, diverse cultures and religions exemplifies its vision of *missio inter gentes* as the way forward.

Moving on to the landmark Final Statement of the Fifth FABC Plenary Assembly (Bandung 1990), the FABC explains that the task of doing Christian mission in Asia is all about “being with the people, responding to their needs, with sensitiveness to the presence of God in cultures and other religious traditions, and witnessing to the values of God’s Kingdom through presence, solidarity, sharing and word,” and therefore, mission “will mean a dialogue with Asian poor, with its local cultures, and with other religious traditions” (*FABC V*, art. 3.1.2, in *Ibid.*: 280). While the FABC affirms that

⁷In view of the importance of highlighting how these key pronouncements reveal the FABC approach of *missio inter gentes*, a certain amount of repetition of texts covered in the earlier parts of this essay is necessary and unavoidable.

“the proclamation of Jesus Christ is the center and primary element of evangelization,” nonetheless, it explains that this proclamation means:

first of all, the witness of Christians and of Christian communities to the values of the Kingdom of God, *a proclamation through Christlike deeds*. For Christians in Asia, to proclaim Christ means above all to live like him, in the midst of our neighbors of other faiths and persuasions, and to do his deeds by the power of his grace. Proclamation through dialogue and deeds this is the first call to the Churches in Asia. (*FABC V*, art. 4.1, in *Ibid.*: 281-282, italics in the original)

As far as the FABC is concerned, this non-triumphalistic, non-confrontational *missio inter gentes* approach is necessary because Asia is a continent “marked by diversity and torn by conflicts,” and therefore “the church must in a special way be a sacrament – a visible sign and instrument of unity and harmony” (*FABC V*, art. 4.2, in *Ibid.*: 282). As the FABC further explains in the same document, the Christian community “must live in *companionship*, as true *partners* with all Asians as they pray, work, struggle and suffer for a better human life, and as they search for the meaning of human life and progress,” because “the human person created in Christ, redeemed by Christ and united by Christ to himself is the way for the church, the church must walk along with him/her in human solidarity” (*FABC V*, art. 6.2, in *Ibid.*: 283).

Five years later, at the Sixth FABC Plenary Assembly (Manila 1995), the FABC expands on the 1990 Bandung Statement by rooting it in the quintessentially Asian ideal of harmony amidst pluralistic diversity. Hence, the FABC speaks of “a vision of unity in diversity, a communion of life among diverse peoples” which characterizes the rich diversity of ancient Asian cultures and faiths to undergird its own “vision of holistic life, life that is achieved and entrusted to every person and every community of persons, regardless of gender, creed or culture, class or color.” In this vein, the FABC envisages “a life *with integrity and dignity*, a *life of compassion* for the multitudes, especially for the poor and needy,” as well as “a life of *solidarity* with every form of life and of *sensitive care* for the earth.” As it explains, this vision of life is rooted in “the Asian reverential sense of mystery and of the sacred, a spirituality that regards life as sacred and discovers the Transcendent and its gifts,” which nourishes the “deep interiority draws people to experience *harmony* and inner peace and infuses ethics into all of

creation” (*FABC VI*, art. 10, in Eilers 1997: 5, emphasis in the original). Here, one finds yet another characteristic of *missio inter gentes*: a holistic approach to doing Christian mission that recognizes, reveres and roots the gospel message in the Asian reverential sense of mystery and of the sacred.

Perhaps the clearest articulation of a *missio inter gentes* view can be seen in the Final Statement of the Seventh FABC Plenary Assembly (Samphran 2000). In this important document, the FABC reiterates what it had stated five years earlier in its 1995 Manila Plenary Statement it is committed to the “emergence of the Asianness of the church in Asia” and asserting that “the church has to be an embodiment of the Asian vision and values of life, especially interiority, harmony, a holistic and inclusive approach to every area of life” (*FABC VII*, Eilers 2002: 8). More significantly, the FABC is convinced that this Asianness of the Church is the “special gift the world is awaiting,” and explains that “the whole world is in need of a holistic paradigm for meeting the challenges of life,” and “together with all Asians, the church, a tiny minority in this vast continent, has a singular contribution to make, and this contribution is the task of the whole church in Asia” (*FABC VII*, in *Ibid.*: 9). In addition, the FABC reiterates that the “most effective means of evangelization and service in the name of Christ has always been and continues to be the *witness of life*” (*FABC VII*, in *Ibid.*: 12), and it is only through such witnessing that “Asian people will recognize the gospel that we announce when they see in our life the transparency of the message of Jesus and the inspiring and healing figure of men and women immersed in God” (*FABC VII*, in *Ibid.*: 12-13).

Missio Ad Gentes compared with Missio Inter Gentes

How does the FABC *missio inter gentes* approach compare with the traditional *missio ad gentes*⁸ approach that was the hallmark of two millennia of Christian mission in Asia? To begin with, if there is one thing that both

⁸In *Redemptoris Missio* (RM), John Paul II defines *missio ad gentes* as mission “directed to people or groups who do not yet believe in Christ, who are far from Christ, in whom the church has not yet taken root . . . and whose culture has not yet been influenced by the gospel” (see RM 34, in John Paul II 1991: 551). In other words, by its very definition *missio ad gentes* is directed towards non-Christians: “it is addressed to groups and settings which are non-Christians because the preaching of the gospel and the presence of the church are either absent or insufficient” (RM 34, in *Ibid.*).

the proponents of *missio ad gentes* and the FABC with its vision of *missio inter gentes* would unequivocally agree upon, it is the *necessity of mission* in the Asian milieu. In principle, the FABC would have no objection to the goal of bringing the Good News of Christ's love, hope and liberation to all the peoples of Asia. Neither would the FABC quibble with Vatican II's understanding that the church is missionary in nature. On the one hand, it appears that the traditional *missio ad gentes* paradigm focuses on the *why*, *what* and *who* of mission, trying to justify the need for mission and what the content ought to be. One gets the unmistakable impression that the *missio ad gentes* paradigm is articulated from *the perspective of the missionaries reaching out to the unbaptized*. On the other hand, the FABC takes the question of *why*, *what* and *who* for granted, focusing rather on the *how* of mission or the questions of methodology and approaches.

More importantly, the divergences between the FABC's *missio inter gentes* approach and the traditional *missio ad gentes* approach hinge upon their differing approaches to the issue of religious pluralism. Generally speaking, the *missio ad gentes* approach is uncomfortable with religious pluralism, viewing it as a significant challenge to the distinctiveness of the Christian gospel. This is because the *missio ad gentes* approach is rooted in a perspective of Christianity that is (or has for a long time been) dominant in the European socio-cultural and political scene,⁹ although it now faces stiff competition from secularism and postmodernism.

In particular, *missio ad gentes* presumes a classicist perspective with Europe (or Rome) as the center of Truth, and sees the task of mission in terms of European missionaries belonging to mission societies or missionary religious orders radiating outwards from this center towards those regions where ignorance of the Truth reigns. Thus, *missio ad gentes* gives primacy to verbal proclamation as the principal vehicle of Christian mission, especially the explicit, verbal proclamation of the unicity and uniqueness of Christ for human salvation to (*ad*) non-Christians as the primary task of mission.

⁹Interestingly, it is still a common perception among many contemporary Asians that Christianity is the white man's religion. E.g., many Muslim Malays in Malaysia continue to refer to Christianity as *agama orang putih* (literally, the religion of the white people). In contrast, as the long-time missiologist and missionary to Asia, Scott Sunquist, puts it, "Christianity is a world religion that was long dominated by the West" (quoted in Burrows 2001: 19). See also Sanneh 2000.

The goal of *missio ad gentes* is that ultimately religious pluralism should eventually give way to the explicit acceptance of the Christian gospel by non-Christians, because only Christianity can fulfill fully the deepest hopes and aspirations of non-Christians that other religions could only aspire to.

For proponents of *missio ad gentes*, although life-witness and dialogue are important dimensions of the task of mission, these cannot take precedence over verbal, explicit proclamation as the primary task of mission. Such an approach is essentially deductive, drawn from abstract, universal principles, and having no direct engagement with the diverse and pluralistic realities of Asia. Although the proponents of this view is cognizant of the rich diversity and plurality of religions, cultures and peoples in Asia, they do not view this diversity as part of God's creative genius because of their deductive approach to theologizing, which understands salvation history in linear, fulfillment terms, as an evolution from pre-biblical to biblical faith, and culminating in Christ as the one and only savior of the world.

By contrast, the FABC views religious pluralism not as something that has to be confronted and overcome, but as something that defines the Asian landscape. That being the case, the Asian bishops have, again and again, indicated their preference for an approach to mission that seeks to be less confrontational. While the sapiential Asian vision of the FABC does not neglect the importance of proclamation, it also values friendship and trust, relationality and relationship-building, dialogue and consensus, as well as solidarity and harmony as constitutive elements of the task of Christian mission in Asia. Because the FABC approach to mission focuses on the immersion of the Christian gospel and local churches in the Asian realities, with its commitment and service to life in solidarity with the Asian peoples, one could speak of a *missio inter gentes*, viz., mission *among* the Asian peoples.

Specifically, the FABC views the salvation history of the Asian continent as embodied in the history, religions, cultures, challenges, aspirations and hopes of its many peoples. For the FABC, salvation history did not begin with the coming of Christianity to Asia. Rather, it recognizes the Father's and Spirit's presence and saving activity in and through Asian religious traditions which preceded the coming of Christianity to Asia, and which also continue as an integral part of ongoing Asian religious history.

Thus, the FABC rejects the presumption that Asia was a *tabula rasa* as far as salvation history was concerned, and also any attempt to relegate Asian religious traditions to the theological dustbin on account of any presumption of their inability to act as vehicles of God's self-revelation. On this basis, the FABC is able to speak of tapping into the movement throughout all of Asia among peoples of various faiths to break down traditional barriers of division and hostility, and their initiative to reach out to neighbors of other faiths in a spirit of love, friendship, harmony and collaboration, and more importantly, "discern[ing] the hand of God in all these aspirations, movements and initiatives" (*BIRA IV/11*, art. 5, in Rosales 1992: 318-319).

Clearly, the FABC's preferred mode of mission as a threefold dialogue with Asian peoples in the fullness of their myriad cultures, religions and extreme poverty, as well as the promotion of the Kingdom of God as the principal goal of mission points to a mission strategy that is geared, not to (*ad*) the Asian peoples, but rather, among (*inter*) the Asian peoples: in essence, a *missio inter gentes*. In particular, the FABC has reiterated repeatedly that the task of Christian mission, although clearly necessary, is to be done not for its own sake, or even for the sake of church growth, but for the sake of the Kingdom of God. As far as the FABC was concerned, because the church is at the service of the Kingdom of God, Asian Christians are called to contribute to Asian cultures, religions and socio-economic challenges, even if these cultures, religions and societies do not become institutionally Christian. For the FABC, missionaries are not called to conquer the Asian world in the name of a triumphant Christ, or build a triumphant Christendom on Asian soil, but to serve by giving of themselves and bringing the life and hope of God's Kingdom to a world beset with challenges and problems. As a result, while proponents of *missio ad gentes* place great importance on growth that can be measured in terms of numerical and territorial expansion, the FABC prefers a qualitative approach that seeks to transform and heal the brokenness in Asian cultures and Asian realities. In other words, the FABC accepts that the Asian Church will always be a little flock in the sea of diverse Asian religions and cultures in pluralistic Asia, while proponents of *missio ad gentes* dream of the day when the church will grow and claim the allegiance of a majority of Asians, and in the process causing the extinction of other world religions.

Moreover, the FABC is convinced that “if Asian churches do not discover their own identity, they will have no future” (*Asian Colloquium on Ministries in the Church*, art. 14(ii), in *Ibid.*: 70).

Conclusion

The FABC’s mission theology does not begin from above or from the center, but from below and from the periphery, moving towards the center. For the FABC, mission and evangelization is not a one-way street, a uni-directional proclamation of abstract creedal principles and doctrinal truths. Hence, in articulating its *missio inter gentes* approach to the task of doing Christian mission, the FABC begins not with abstract and universalistic theological concepts and categories, but with the life experiences and other challenges arising from the ongoing encounter with contemporary Asian realities and specific Asian contexts. For the FABC, mission is more than planting a new local church in places where it does not yet exist. As far as the FABC is concerned, the Asian peoples are not objects of mission, to be converted and brought into the Church, although Christians certainly do not hesitate to extend such an invitation where appropriate. Rather, the focus of the Asian local church’s *missio inter gentes* is identified with Jesus own mission of bringing about the Kingdom of God *among* his people.

Following in the footsteps of Jesus, the FABC has also formulated its *missio inter gentes* in terms of building the Kingdom of God in the Asian milieu. For the FABC, Asian local churches are called to collaborate with God’s ongoing mission of bringing about the Kingdom of God through their life witness and threefold dialogue with the Asian peoples and their cultures, religions and marginalizing life challenges. More specifically, the FABC’s *missio inter gentes* entails a commitment to work in harmony with the life realities of the Asian *Sitz im Leben*. In this vein, the FABC views inculturation, dialogue and human liberation as integral dimensions of the task of Christian mission in Asia, and not merely pre-evangelization.

Going one step further, the FABC also perceives the church’s mission as inspired by God’s *prior* activity in the world, through the missions of the Father and the Spirit. Indeed, as far as the FABC is concerned, the deep soteriological underpinnings of Asian religions and philosophies that have inspired multitudes of Asians are not evil, but from God. Hence, the FABC is unequivocal in asserting that the wisdom of Asian philosophies and the

soteriological elements of Asian religions are all inspired by the Holy Spirit working outside the boundaries of the institutional Church.

The principal means of *missio inter gentes* is the quintessential Asian trait of *dialogue*, a two-way encounter of the Christian Gospel with the threefold realities of Asian cultures, religions and the poor. Here, it is the case that not only the Asian socio-religious realities may be enriched by Christianity, but also that Christianity may be enriched by the Asian socio-religious realities. Undoubtedly, the FABC regards dialogue and harmony as necessary to redress the damage which has been perpetrated by centuries of colonial domination, resulting in many Asian ecclesial communities being very wary of any attempt at evangelization which smacks of an approach of instrumentalization. In particular, dialogue has the potential to bring about opportunities for two or more parties, with their different worldviews, to enter into each other horizons so as to understand each other better and create harmonious relations between them.

Finally, the rich and vivid imagery from the conclusion of the Final Statement of the Seventh FABC Plenary Assembly captures most succinctly the *raison d'être* of the FABC's *missio inter gentes*, and could perhaps serve as a fitting conclusion to this essay:

As we celebrate the Great Jubilee of the birth of Jesus Christ our Savior, and the Holy Doors of churches are being opened, we look at the image of the door and are gladdened to rediscover our calling to enter into the community of Christ's disciples and to share in his life and mission. It is through the same doors that we now go out into the world of the peoples of Asia and into their struggles and joys, which are also ours. (Eilers 2002: 15)

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Este ensayo intenta investigar la teología de la misión de la Federación de las Conferencias Episcopales de Asia (FABC), como se la presenta en sus documentos oficiales a lo largo de las tres décadas de su existencia, y de evaluar sus implicaciones. En sus documentos oficiales, la FABC se ha manejado a partir del presupuesto que el ambiente asiático, con su rica diversidad y pluralidad de religiones, culturas y visiones filosóficas del mundo exige un acercamiento explícitamente asiático a la proclamación del Evangelio que tenga en cuenta tal diversidad y pluralismo. Para ello, este ensayo revisa y analiza los aspectos centrales y principios fundamentales de la teología de la misión de la FABC. También explora las implicaciones del acercamiento misionológico de la FABC para asumir los desafíos de la tarea de realizar la misión cristiana en este *Sitz im Leben* asiático diverso y pluralista. Particularmente se trata de la insistencia coherente de FABC que la misión cristiana en Asia se realiza mejor a través del triple diálogo con la gran cantidad de tradiciones religiosas asiáticas, las culturas asiáticas y las inmensas masas de pobres y marginados en Asia. Después sugiere que el acercamiento misionológico de la FABC se describe mejor como *missio inter gentes* (misión *entre* las naciones), y no tanto como el tradicional *missio ad gentes* (misión *hacia* las naciones), debido a la manera cómo la FABC entiende el tema del pluralismo religioso en Asia y su preferencia por un acercamiento dialógico que evita la confrontación, para relacionarse con este pluralismo.

Dieser Aufsatz studiert die Missionstheologie der Vereinigung der Bischofskonferenzen Asiens (FABC), wie sie sich in den offiziellen Dokumenten der drei Jahrzehnte ihres Bestehens darstellt, und wertet ihre Implikationen aus. In ihren offiziellen Dokumenten arbeitet die FABC von der Annahme ausgehend, dass das asiatische Ambiente mit seiner reichen Vielfalt und Pluralität von Religionen, Kulturen und philosophischen Weltanschauungen auch einen dezidiert asiatischen Zugang zur Verkündigung erfordert, der dieser Vielfalt und Pluralität entspricht. In dieser Hinsicht stellt der Aufsatz die Hauptaspekte und Grundprinzipien der FABC Missionstheologie zusammen und untersucht sie. Er geht auch den Implikationen des missiologischen Ansatzes der FABC nach, was die Anforderungen der Durchführung der christlichen Mission im asiatischen *Sitz im Leben* mit seiner Vielfalt und Pluralität angeht, besonders die ständige Forderung der FABC, dass die christliche Mission in Asien am besten verwirklicht wird im dreifachen Dialog mit den ungezählten asiatischen Religionen, den asiatischen Kulturen und den ungeheuren Massen der Armen und Ausgeschlossenen Asiens. Schliesslich schlägt der Autor vor, den Missionsbegriff der FABC besser zu verstehen als *missio inter gentes* (Mission *unter* den Völkern) denn als die traditionelle *missio ad gentes* (Mission *zu den* Völkern), aufgrund der Weise, wie die FABC die Bedeutung des religiösen Pluralismus in Asien sieht, und wegen ihrer dialogischen, nicht konfrontationsbetonten Vorgangsweise im Umgang damit.

Le présent article tente d'analyser la théologie de la mission de la Fédération des Conférences d'évêques d'Asie (FABC) – telle qu'elle a été présentée dans ses documents officiels au cours de ses trente dernières années d'existence – et d'évaluer ses implications. Dans ses documents officiels, la FABC est partie du principe que le milieu asiatique avec ses grandes diversité et pluralité de religions, de cultures et de visions philosophiques du monde, réclame une manière proprement asiatique d'aborder la proclamation de l'Évangile, une

approche qui tient compte de cette diversité et de ce pluralisme. A cette fin, l'article rappelle et examine les principaux aspects et principes fondateurs de la théologie de la mission de la FABC. Il évalue également la capacité de l'approche missiologique de la FABC de faire face à la tâche que représente la mise en œuvre de la mission chrétienne dans le *Sitz-im-Leben* divers et pluraliste de l'Asie, surtout le principe constamment affirmé par la FABC, selon lequel la mise en œuvre de la mission chrétienne en Asie passe de préférence par un dialogue tant avec la myriade de traditions religieuses et de cultures asiatiques qu'avec les masses innombrables de pauvres et d'êtres marginalisés du continent. Il suggère ensuite de présenter l'approche missiologique de la FABC comme une *missio inter gentes* (mission entre les nations) plutôt que comme la traditionnelle *missio ad gentes*, à cause de la manière dont la FABC conçoit la question du pluralisme religieux en Asie et privilégie une approche dialogique évitant l'affrontement.

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